

EGYPT

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE
AGAINST WOMEN AROUND
TAHRIR SQUARE

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“I will not stay quiet. All women in Egypt need to wake up – those to whom this [sexual assault] happened and those to whom this didn’t happen. Otherwise, such violence will continue...”

Dalia Abdel Wahab, a protester and survivor of a violent sexual assault on 25 January 2013, speaking to Amnesty International

Violent sexual assaults against women, including rapes, have surged in the vicinity of Cairo’s iconic Tahrir Square in recent months. They peaked in scale and brutality on 25 January 2013 during protests commemorating the second anniversary of the start of the 2011 uprising that ousted President Hosni Mubarak.

In a memorandum sent to President Mohamed Morsi on 29 June 2012 shortly after his election, Amnesty International urged him to address chronic violence and discrimination against women, including the targeting of female protesters by security and armed forces. In spite of Morsi’s promise to be the president of all Egyptians, such calls went unheeded.

It is vital that President Morsi, as well as leaders of ruling and opposition political parties, exercise strong political will to tackle gender-based violence. President Morsi as head of state must take immediate action to ensure that all incidents of sexual assault and harassment of women in and around Tahrir Square are effectively investigated and perpetrators brought to justice. Until the pervasive climate of impunity for such acts of gender-based violence ends, women will continue to face violent attacks while their attackers brazenly go unpunished. Long overdue legal and institutional reforms must also be introduced to stop repetition of such crimes and end impunity.

ATTACKS ON 25 JANUARY 2013

Operation Anti-Sexual Harassment/Assault (OpAntiSH/A), an initiative set up in November 2012 by several Egyptian human rights organizations and individuals, received reports of 19 cases of attacks against women in the vicinity of Tahrir Square on 25 January 2013. Activists leading another group, “I Saw Harassment”, told Amnesty International that they intervened in a further five cases in the same area before violence escalated. Madga Adly, a doctor with the Nadeem Centre for the Rehabilitation of Victims of Violence, which provides medical, psychological and legal support to some of the survivors, confirmed that at least two women were cut with blades, including on or near their genitals. Other women were beaten and/or threatened with knives, blades and other weapons.

Survivors of violence included well known figures in the women’s rights movement as well as protesters, activists involved in rescue efforts and passers-by. Attacks took place mostly between 6pm and 10pm in the vicinity of Tahrir Square, including on Talaat Harb Street, the

entrance of the Sadat metro station, behind Omar Maqram Mosque, and by Hardees fast-food chain restaurant in the square itself.

A clear pattern of attacks emerged through accounts given by survivors as well as activists, lawyers and doctors involved in rescue operations and follow-up support. The targeted women were either approached alone or separated from their friends and colleagues by a group of men, mostly in their twenties or thirties, which gradually grew in number. They were encircled by the mob and then countless hands groped their bodies, including their breasts, genitals and buttocks; pulled their hair; tugged their bodies in different directions; and attempted, in some cases successfully, to remove their clothes. The women were then violently dragged while surrounded by the mob to different locations.

Such attacks lasted from a few minutes to over an hour, until the women were rescued or the perpetrators abandoned them. The weapons used in such assaults, including knives and sticks, were also used to fight off individuals trying to help the women. In at least one instance on 25 January, perpetrators attacked an ambulance that arrived to transport the survivor to a hospital and only allowed it through when, according to witnesses, the ambulance driver told them that the woman had died. Survivors and people trying to help women during or after the attacks reported that perpetrators frequently claimed to be helping the victims while in fact violating them. They said that it was difficult to assess who was trying to help and who was involved in the mob violence.

Dr Rawya AbdelRahman, a 67-year-old grandmother, a well-known figure and leading member of a network of women's rights activists, recounted to Amnesty International how she was assaulted during a women's march and protest on 25 January 2013. She said that a group of about 10 women gathered at about 7.30pm under the statue in Talaat Harb Square. They started singing and shouting slogans related to the empowerment of women and criticism of President Morsi, the upper chamber of parliament, and the Muslim Brotherhood. She said that they were joined by some 20 other women, and over a thousand participants and onlookers. A group of imams from al-Azhar (the leading Muslim religious and educational institution in Egypt) arrived. One of the imams spoke, emphasizing the moderate nature of Islam as promoting the rights of women and non-Muslims. At around 9pm, the group started moving from Talaat Harb Square to Tahrir Square along with al-Azhar imams. Dr Rawya AbdelRahman said that as they were moving along Talaat Harb Street she noticed a group of men who appeared to be in their twenties and thirties and had not participated in the initial protest. She said they formed a circle around the women, initially claiming to be protecting them. She described what happened next:

"I could no longer see the imams in front of us... The space was gradually becoming narrower and I started hearing [name removed] screaming... The girl next to me disappeared... Tens of hands then came onto me, some touching my thighs... I started screaming: 'What is this? What is happening?'... Then five or six men dragged me away from the circle, as someone was trying to lift my clothes up... They didn't manage because I had lots of layers on and a long heavy coat... They were pulling and pushing me in all directions. At some points I couldn't feel my feet on the ground."

Eventually, the mob abandoned Dr Rawya AbdelRahman by a food cart and someone – she suspects it was one of the attackers – offered her water. This action, along with what she

described as the co-ordinated nature of the attack, led her to believe that the assault was organized and intended to deter her and other women from joining protests and to attack the opposition movement as a whole. The attack left Dr Rawya AbdelRahman injured and she required treatment and physical therapy.

Singer and mother-of-one, Dalia Abdel Wahab, 39, was sexually assaulted during the same march. Her testimony mirrored the account given by Dr Rawya AbdelRahman. She told Amnesty International:

“Suddenly a wave of people came onto me. I found myself on the ground for some five minutes, while millions of hands were violating me... In a second my jacket and bra were off, and my shirt and trousers were being pulled off, my spectacles were lost in the melee... They stepped on me, pulled my hair... I could no longer see faces. I felt that I could no longer breathe, I was suffocating. I was being pulled and pushed in all directions... I could no longer walk... I felt paralyzed, my brain was blank and I thought I was going to die.”

Dalia Abdel Wahab was then dragged inside the mob to a dark street, pushed against a metal fence and threatened with a kitchen knife. Meanwhile, other hands were groping her from behind. She was eventually carried to a small bookstand. From there, a woman wearing a full-face veil carried her to a medical tent. Dalia Abdel Wahab spent some time hidden in the tent until two other women and a man took her to safety at about 10pm. Despite her ordeal, and pressure from some people close to her not to speak out due to the fear of stigmatization and “shame”, Dalia Abdel Wahab remains defiant. She told Amnesty International:

“I am really angry, I want to claim my rights, I will not be afraid and I will continue participating in protests and go down to the streets... Some bad things that happen to you break you, while other things make you stronger... I feel like this will make me stronger.”

Other women bravely shared similar testimonies publicly. For example, Dr Hania Mohib went on television on 1 February and described an attack by “masses of people” and countless groping hands on 25 January on Tahrir Square, which left her without her trousers.¹

RESCUERS ATTACKED

Activists co-ordinating rescue efforts during attacks taking place in recent months have often been exposed to physical and sexual assaults. Ganit AbdelAlim, from the “I Saw Harassment” group, told Amnesty International that after she heard a report of an alleged ongoing attack, she rushed to the scene with another female activist. The incident took place in Tahrir Square at about 8.30pm on 23 November 2012, during protests against President Morsi’s Constitutional Declaration.² She described to Amnesty International what happened:

“I ran inside the circle of men to try to save her; the men let me through. Once I was in the middle of the circle, I realized that the person being attacked was my colleague and that the reported attack was a ruse to get us to the scene to intimidate and assault us... Suddenly hands were on my breasts, inside my bra, and squeezing my nipples... I was trying to defend myself and heard my colleague screaming. Her chest was bare and they cut her bra down the middle... In the middle of this, they were insulting us and calling us whores who were asking for this by squeezing ourselves into the middle of men... At some point I could feel 15 hands

on me... Someone grabbed me by my clothes and was dragging me on the ground... Another guy put his hand down my trousers.”

Fortunately, other protesters managed to get the two to safety in a nearby field hospital. They also took one of the attackers to a police station and eventually to the Qasr al-Nil Public Prosecution office.

A volunteer with OpAntiSH/A, who was assaulted on 25 January in Tahrir Square, was also attacked while trying to prevent an assault. She published her testimony of Facebook describing, how she and a female friend had rushed to intervene in a reported sexual assault on a woman, and were themselves attacked. She described numerous hands ripping her clothes, touching her all over her body, including her breasts and buttocks, and reaching inside her trousers. They eventually managed to escape into a restaurant.

A meeting by “I Saw Harassment” held in Abgadiya library in downtown Cairo on the evening of 30 January also ended up in violence. According to participants, one of the volunteers was sexually harassed as she was entering the building. After she slapped the harasser and ran inside at about 6.15pm, around eight people armed with knives and swords followed her, breaking the door and causing serious damage to the library.

Male volunteers seeking to assist assaulted women have also been exposed to violence, including sexual assaults. Dalia Abdel Wahab (see above) told Amnesty International that while she was sitting in the medical tent, she witnessed a man being hit on the head with a stick as he was trying to reach her.

A volunteer with OpAntiSH/A, Mostafa Qandil described how several men tried to put their hands inside his trousers and beat him while he was attempting to rescue a woman being assaulted on 25 January.³

A CULTURE OF IMPUNITY

Several women’s rights activists and others believe that the sexual assaults on women are organized and co-ordinated – possibly by state actors – with the aim of silencing them, excluding them from public spaces and the political events shaping Egypt’s future, and breaking the resistance of the opposition. They point to the fact that perpetrators use similar tactics in their attacks, which seem designed to degrade and intimidate women. The activists also emphasize the perpetrators’ calm demeanor, relatively well-off appearance, and ability to carry out such attacks in public without fear of punishment.

This pattern of sexual violence targeted against women protesters in recent months is reminiscent of the use of sexual harassment and assault against women protesters under former President Hosni Mubarak. In 2005, for instance, groups of men were reportedly hired to attack women journalists taking part in a protest calling for the boycott of the referendum on constitutional reform. To date, nobody has been held to account for these crimes in Egypt.

During the rule of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (11 February 2011 to 30 June 2012), women protesters were targeted, including during demonstrations calling for women’s rights and the end of sexual harassment.⁴

The armed forces have subjected women protesters to torture or other inhuman or degrading treatment on a number of occasions, apparently on the basis of their gender. One of the most egregious examples was the forced “virginity testing” of 17 women protesters by army personnel on 9 March 2011. To date, no one has been brought to justice for the forced “virginity tests” and in March 2012 a military court dismissed a case brought by one of the women.⁵

25 January 2013 was not the first time women including Egyptian and foreign journalists faced sexual assaults in the vicinity of Tahrir Square since Hosni Mubarak left power. Several testimonies of violent attacks on women on 23 November 2012 have emerged in addition to that of Ganit AlbdeAlim (see above). Yamine Al-Bermawi described on television a horrific attack that day which lasted some 70 minutes and left her without her shirt and bra. Her trousers and skin were cut from behind, apparently with blades.⁶

There have been fewer violent sexual assaults on women reported since 25 January, but they have continued, including during protests in Tahrir Square on 1 February. Efforts have continued by initiatives such as OpAntiSH/A, HarassMap, Tahrir Bodyguards, “I Saw Harassment” and others to prevent and respond to such assaults, and assist the survivors. While an Amnesty International representative was observing the group’s operations, OpAntiSH/A intervened in at least three cases involving four survivors that happened between about 5.30pm and 7.30pm on 1 February. At least one of the women sexually assaulted required hospital treatment. As in earlier incidents, mobs attacked ambulances and the field hospital in which survivors had sought refuge.

It is clear that these attacks are facilitated by the deep discrimination against women in law and practice, the institutionalized attitudes that discriminate against women, and the failure of the authorities to prevent, combat and punish violence against women and adopt anti-harassment legislation proposed by women’s rights activists.

The authorities announced plans for new sexual harassment legislation in October 2012 and again after the public outcry following attacks on 25 January 2013, but have yet to carry through. In March 2011, amendments to the Penal Code had already increased penalties for various forms of sexual harassment and assaults. For instance, Article 268 imposed prison terms of up to 15 years for “sexual assault”, while Article 306 (Bis A) prescribed prison sentences between six months and two years and/or fines for verbal harassment. Women’s rights activists and lawyers note that the introduction of these amendments has done little to combat or decrease the phenomenon and impunity for sexual violence and harassment remains rife.

The Egyptian Constitution adopted following a public referendum in late December 2012 failed to protect the rights of women and to explicitly prohibit discrimination on the grounds of gender.⁷ This entrenched discriminatory practices and attitudes.

INADEQUATE RESPONSE BY THE AUTHORITIES

Given the stigmatization attached to harassment and sexual assaults against women, most

cases go unreported. In the small minority of cases where women and girls do file complaints, they face numerous obstacles in their fight for justice. A lawyer involved in sexual harassment cases told Amnesty International that frequently police officers registering the complaints, as well as prosecutors investigating the cases, encourage plaintiffs to drop the complaints and “forgive” the perpetrators. The lawyer attributed the attitude to a lack of professionalism, a desire to reduce the workload, and a failure to prioritize incidents they considered “minor” compared to murder or theft.

Other lawyers and women’s rights activists also blame the discriminatory culture against women that permeates all levels of Egyptian society, including law enforcement officials who pressure the plaintiff not to “create a scandal” or blame her for the incident based on her choice of attire or her “inappropriate” presence in public. For instance, Ganit AbdelAlim (see above) recounted to Amnesty International that police officers and the prosecutor handling her case pressed her to drop her complaint, and only reluctantly agreed to file a report when she insisted with the help of lawyers.

Other obstacles cited by lawyers include the unavailability or unwillingness of witnesses to testify, and the unknown identity of perpetrators. One lawyer told Amnesty International that the insensitive attitude and gender bias of prosecutors and forensic pathologists in addressing cases of survivors of sexual violence further deterred survivors from pursuing judicial remedies.

On 28 January the Public Prosecution announced an investigation into a rape that happened on 25 January 2013. Investigations into the violence, regardless of whether direct complaints have been lodged, must be full, impartial and independent and not involve any bodies possibly implicated in the attacks. Investigations should also focus on whether the sexual assaults were organized and co-ordinated, and whether any state or organized non-state actors were behind or incited the attacks.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Amnesty International calls on all political and religious leaders in Egypt to publicly condemn all forms of sexual harassment and gender-based violence;

Amnesty International calls on President Mohamed Morsi to immediately:

- Publicly condemn all forms of sexual harassment and gender-based violence, including when committed against anti-government protesters, and restate his administration’s commitment to protect the bodily integrity of women and respect freedom of expression and assembly;
- Ensure that full, impartial and independent investigations are conducted into all alleged cases of gender-based violence and attacks on those attempting to rescue survivors, including in the vicinity of Tahrir Square, with a view to identifying and bringing perpetrators to justice in fair trials, without recourse to the death penalty. Such investigations should also focus on whether the sexual assaults were organized and whether any state or organized non-state actors were behind these attacks;

- Ensure that survivors, their relatives, and witnesses are protected from any form of intimidation or harassment;
- Ensure that investigations into crimes of gender-based violence against women are based on the respect for the rights of the survivors, include women and investigators trained in addressing gender-based violence and open to scrutiny by civil society and experts to guarantee their quality and gender competence and ensure they guarantee the full participation of survivors;
- Ensure that investigations into crimes of gender-based violence are accompanied by effective training of officials in non-discrimination and women's rights, are adequately resourced, and include rigorous enforcement and monitoring;
- Ensure that prosecutors diligently investigate cases of sexual violence and harassment and prosecute those found responsible;
- Ensure that survivors of gender-based violence receive adequate reparations including all necessary medical and psychological treatment;
- Give clear instructions to law enforcement officials to diligently address combat violence and harassment against women; and ensure that women can exercise their right to peaceful assembly without fear for their safety;
- In consultation with experts including women's and human rights activists, lawyers, doctors, psychologists, educators; devise and implement a strategy to stamp out sexual violence and harassment against women, including a public awareness raising campaign to combat discrimination, gender-based violence and gender stereotyping;
- Extend an invitation to the UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences and to the UN working group on issue of discrimination against women in law and in practice to visit Egypt; and
- Ensure that medical facilities receiving survivors of gender-based violence are protected from attacks and have the necessary competence and gender sensitivity to provide effective treatment which respects the rights of survivors of gender-based violence.

Amnesty International is also reiterating the following recommendations to President Morsi and his administration to:

- Introduce legal provisions to combat domestic violence, including marital rape, and sexual harassment, in compliance with Egypt's obligations under international human rights law;
- Amend legislation to ensure that the definition of rape in Egyptian legislation is in compliance to international law and standards, and is not limited to the penetration of a penis into a vagina;
- Implement the February 2010 recommendation of the Committee on the Elimination of

Discrimination against Women, which calls on the Egyptian authorities to take the necessary measures to secure the participation of women in the various phases of the electoral process;

- Comprehensively review existing and proposed legislation on personal status, ensuring that women and men have equal rights to marriage, divorce, the custody of children and inheritance, in line with Egypt's obligations under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women;
- Amend Articles 260-263 of the Penal Code to allow abortion for women and girl survivors of rape and incest, or when a pregnancy poses a grave risk to the health of the woman or girls; and
- Amend Law No. 126 of 2008 to prohibit female genital mutilation in all cases.

¹ Video recording available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FnlC72FtnY>

² On 22 November 2012, President Morsi decreed extensive new powers for himself, including that courts were barred from challenging his decisions. For more information on concerns that President Morsi's Constitutional Declaration undermined the rule of law, see Amnesty International, "Egypt: President Morsi constitutional changes trample rule of law", (Index: MDE 12/038/2012), 23 November 2012: <http://amnesty.org/en/library/info/MDE12/038/2012/en>

³ Testimony available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=okOHOQorsfA>

⁴ See, for example, Amnesty International, "Egypt: Investigate attacks on women protesters", 11 June 2012: <http://www.amnesty.org/en/for-media/press-releases/egypt-investigate-attacks-women-protesters-2012-06-11>

⁵ In June 2011, during a meeting with Amnesty International's Secretary General, Major General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces admitted that "virginity tests" had been conducted on women detainees in March, and pledged that they would not happen again. The general also noted that women seeking to work for the army were required to undertake "virginity tests". An administrative court in Egypt ruled in December 2011 that the forced "virginity tests" carried out on women in March 2011 were illegal and ordered that they be stopped. The court ruling cited Amnesty International's meeting with Major General al-Sisi.

⁶ Her testimony can be seen at the following link: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FnlC72FtnY>

⁷ See Amnesty International, "Egypt's new constitution limits fundamental freedoms and ignores the rights of women" (Index: PRE01/590/2012), 30 November 2012: <http://bit.ly/Vk9jLi>

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